



A FAMOUS FRIEND

Jack and DP followed Toilet Roll Angel out of the house facing the beach and off into the town that lay behind it. The buildings on the Island of the Beloved were all painted in ice-cream colors, the streets were very clean, and the other old toys—there didn't seem to be any other kind of Thing here—smiled and said hello as they passed. DP seemed to have lots of friends and there weren't any Loss Adjusters at all. They passed Christmas trees hung with shells and starfish, and shops selling buckets and spades, and a little market where you could buy beach balls and sunglasses. There was even a grooming parlor, where old toys could have splits in their fur sewn up and their eyes sewn back on, by dolls and teddies dressed as doctors.

"Here we are," said Toilet Roll Angel at last, pointing to a giant house made of wood, set in the very middle of town. The sign over the door said THE GROTTTO. As Jack had shrunk to the size of DP, and the door was human-sized, he had no hope of being able to reach the doorbell.

"Who lives here?" he asked.

"You'll see," said Toilet Roll Angel. "You two will have to knock. I haven't got arms."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that," said Jack. "I was only four when I made you."

So Jack and DP hammered on the base of the door, but only Jack's knocks made any noise, because DP's trotters were too soft.

Jack could hear footsteps on the other side of the door: very loud footsteps, as though they were made by a giant. At last, the door creaked open.

There, towering above them, stood an old man with a snowy-white beard, dressed in a white undershirt and scarlet trousers.

"Santa?" gasped Jack. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Er—" said Santa, who for a moment seemed at a loss for what to say. "Well . . . Things deserve Christmas, too, you know, so I—I keep a holiday house here. But a living boy in the Land of the Lost? I never would have believed it—in fact, I didn't think it was possible!"

"It's only possible tonight," said Jack, "if it is still Christmas Eve, Up There?"

"Yes," said Santa, checking his watch. "Yes, there's still about an hour to go."

"Thank goodness. Then, please," said Jack, "could you help me rescue the Christmas Pig, so I can take him home? He's gone to the Wastes of the Unlamented, and I've got to save him from the Loser!"

"Ah," said Santa.

He stroked his beard for a moment or two, then sighed and said, "That's something I can't promise, I'm afraid."

"Oh," said Jack, biting his lip to stop himself crying again.

"I'm not allowed to set foot on the mainland, you see," explained Santa. "The Loser and I—well, it's complicated. I give and he takes. Up There, I mostly have things my way. Here Below, he has his. I can fly you to the Wastes of the Unlamented in my sleigh, as long as I don't land, but then I'll have to leave you. Are you sure you wouldn't rather go home to your bed? It would be far safer and I could make that happen, easily."

"No," said Jack, shaking his head. "I've got to save the Christmas Pig."

"In that case," said Santa, "you're a very brave boy, and I shall ready my sleigh. Wait there."

Santa went back inside his house and closed the door, and Jack, DP, and Toilet Roll Angel waited in the sunshine for him to reappear. There was an odd feeling between them: Jack was still fighting back tears. There was so much he wanted to say to DP, yet he couldn't find the words.

At last, they heard the sound of hooves and jingling, and around the corner of the wooden house came Santa, now wearing his hat, jacket, and boots, leading the eight reindeer who were pulling his sleigh, which was piled high with presents. When they saw the sleigh, not to mention Santa with his hat and boots on, the toys passing by crowded around to watch him take off, and with so many Things watching, Jack found it even harder to put into words all he wanted to say to DP.

"Ready, Jack?" asked Santa.

"Yes," said Jack. "I—I just want to say goodbye." He turned to Toilet Roll Angel. "We'll miss you at the top of the tree."

"Thank you, Jack," said the angel in his singsong voice. "I'll miss being there."

Jack turned to DP. "I wish you could come home as well," he whispered.

For the very last time, DP put his trotters round Jack's neck and Jack breathed in his grubby smell of hiding places, and of the warm cave under the blankets, with a trace of Mum's perfume from when she kissed him good night.

"Losing is part of living," whispered DP into Jack's ear, his snout snuffling against Jack's hair. "But some of us live even though we're lost. That's what love does. I'll always be here, on the Island of the Beloved, and when you hug the Christmas Pig, you'll be hugging me, too, because we're twins, Jack, and everything he feels, I feel, too."

"But if you want to save him," DP went on, "you must be quick. Of all the Things on the Wastes, the Loser will most want to capture the Christmas Pig, as a warning to any Replacement who tries to cheat him in the future."

"Goodbye, DP," said Jack as he let go of his oldest friend.

Jack was so small now, Santa had to lift him up onto the sleigh.

"I'm glad I've seen where you live," Jack called down to DP, wiping away his tears again. "I always knew you loved the beach!"

"I do!" said DP, his button eyes as wet as Jack's. "Good luck, Jack, and give my brother my love! Thank him for what he tried to do! Tell him he's the best and bravest pig there ever was!"



THE SLEIGH RIDE

As the sleigh began to move, even more toys came rushing out of their houses to watch. The reindeer broke into a gallop and the warm wind whipped through Jack's hair. He looked back: DP and Toilet Roll Angel were growing smaller and smaller, and then, with a jingle of harness and a rush of hot air, the sleigh took off, and Jack watched the Island of the Beloved shrink below them. Soon, it was no more than a golden speck in the wide blue ocean.

Quite apart from Santa being much bigger than he was, because Jack was still the size of a toy, he was the most famous person Jack had ever met, which made him feel quite tongue-tied. Fortunately, Santa didn't need any encouragement to talk.

"After I've dropped you off, I'll have to go Up There and get busy delivering presents," he said, smiling down at Jack.

"How do you get all around the world and deliver so many toys in one night?" Jack asked. He'd often wondered this.

"Ah," said Santa, his eyes twinkling, "that's a secret, I'm afraid, but it involves magic, as I expect you've guessed."

"I thought so," said Jack, nodding.

"You, of course, asked for a new bike," said Santa.

"Yes," said Jack. "But I don't really care about the bike, as long as I get the Christmas Pig back."

"Well, if you *do* manage to rescue him, be sure to take him for a ride," said Santa. "He's a pig who greatly enjoys bike rides, though he doesn't know it yet, being so new."

"That makes sense," said Jack, imagining pedaling fast down his street, with the Christmas Pig tucked down the front of his hoodie, CP's head poking out of the top. "He's quite a *daring* pig, isn't he?"

"Very daring," agreed Santa, "to defy the Loser as he has."

"Where did the Loser come from?" asked Jack.

"That," said Santa, no longer smiling, "is a very good question. Nobody knows for sure. Some say he was created by people, that there is so much greed and cruelty Up There that some of it oozed down here, where it began kidnapping Things to help it make a body. Others say the Loser's been here since the dawn of time, a kind of monster who's so envious of humans and all the clever things they create, he steals whatever he can. More than anything else, he craves Things that are valued and loved, like those on the Island of the Beloved, but he can't touch them, which makes him very angry. Now, poke around in the presents at the back there, Jack, and grab yourself something warm to wear."

Jack felt the presents to find one that was squashy and at last unearthed a teddy wearing a sweater that fit him perfectly. He was glad of it, because a few minutes later the warm air began to turn chillier. The painted sky above them turned slowly from bright blue to gray. The sun disappeared behind clouds, and soon snow was whirling down on Jack again.

They flew on, the reindeer's harness jingling, the icy air numbing Jack's face. His thoughts were full of CP, who'd surely have reached the Wastes of the Unlamented by now. He'd be wandering there, missing Jack, loving Jack, but believing that Jack had already returned to the Land of the Living, too happy with DP to care what had become of his Replacement.



RETURN TO THE WASTES

At last, when the sky had turned from gray to black, and the snow was falling so thickly that it coated Santa's beard and Jack's eyelashes, they spotted the lights of the City of the Missed. They flew over the golden roof of Power's palace, the canals reflecting Santa's sleigh and the flying reindeer, and soon they were soaring over the wide, dark Wastes.

Santa now hung a golden lantern on a hook, to shed some light on the ground below. Jack looked around, hoping to see the Christmas Pig. The shadow of the sleigh rippled over the snowy, stony ground, but

there was no sign of any Thing until they glimpsed a small red spot of wandering light.

"Bad habits," Jack told Santa, pointing to the little group of roaming body parts, which still included a mouth smoking a cigarette. "They aren't very nice . . . I think the Loser's caught a few of them," added Jack, turning back to look at the Bad Habits as the sleigh flew on. "There were more when we met them before."

They continued to skim as low over the Wastes as Santa dared, scanning the barren landscape for CP, but Jack couldn't see him anywhere. Now an awful fear gripped his heart: Was he too late? Had CP been caught already?

"Compass!" cried Jack suddenly as the swinging light of the lantern illuminated her round brass body, which was bowling along as fast as ever. "Santa, let me ask Compass if she's seen CP!"

Santa turned the sleigh around and they doubled back to where Compass stood staring at the sight of them.

"*Santa!*" she cried.

"That's me," said Santa, smiling. "Glad to see you're still with us, Compass!"

"Oh, you know 'ow much I enjoy the chase," she said, spinning to watch them as they circled her. "But what're you two doing 'ere?"

"I've come to find the Christmas Pig," called Jack. "Have you seen him?"

At that, Compass's pointer swung suddenly south, giving her a very sad look.

"Well . . . yes, Pajama Boy, I have," she said.

"Where is he?" called Jack, who was starting to get dizzy, because the sleigh was flying in such tight circles.

"I'm afraid," said Compass, "'e was caught, 'alf an hour ago. 'E didn't even run. I shouted at 'im to scarper, but 'e just stood there, waiting for the Loser to snatch 'im up."

"Oh no," Jack whispered.

It was all his fault. He ought to have gotten there sooner, but he'd wasted time deciding what to do, and now . . .

"So he's in the Loser's Lair?" called Santa.

"E's there if 'e's anywhere," said Compass, "but 'e might already 'ave been eaten. The Loser was delighted to get 'is 'ands on 'im. Never seen 'im so 'appy!"

"Compass, d'you know where the Loser's Lair is?" called Jack.

"Course I do," said Compass.

"Will you take me there?"

"You want to go to the Loser's Lair?" said Compass in astonishment.

"Yes," said Jack, preparing to jump. "CP's my pig and if he's still Alivened, I'm taking him home!"

"Jack," said Santa as Jack got ready to jump, "if I can, I'll give you more help later—there might be something I can do for you, Up There. In the meantime, be very careful. The Loser would like nothing better than to catch a living boy!"

"I'll be careful," promised Jack. "Goodbye, Santa, thank you very much!"

With that, Jack eased himself off the sleigh's seat and jumped down onto the Wastes.

He fell into a clump of thistles he hadn't spotted in the darkness, and although it was an uncomfortable, prickly landing, it was better than landing on the sharp flints and stones.

"Goodbye, Jack. Good luck!" called Santa, and he flew away on his sleigh, the golden lantern growing smaller and smaller until it disappeared.



Compass was staring at Jack in amazement.

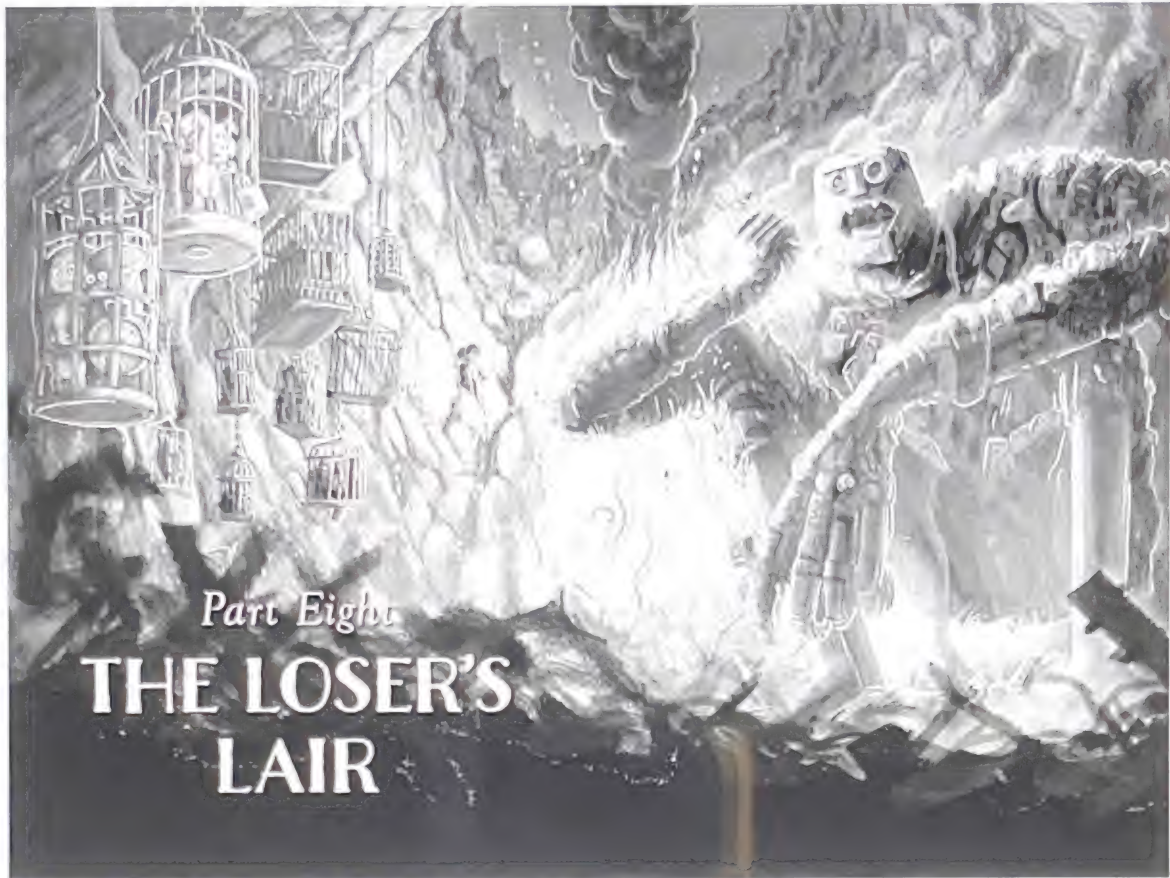
"*What* did Santa just call you?" She rolled a little closer. "A *living boy*?"

"Yes," said Jack. "I'm human. I came down here to find DP, but he's happy on the Island of the Beloved. Now I want to save the Christmas Pig. Please take me to the Loser's Lair, if you know the way."

Compass stared at Jack for a moment longer, then her voice rang out across the Wastes, "They'll talk of this for centuries! The living boy 'oo walked into the Loser's Lair to find 'is pig and . . . Well, we don't know 'ow the story ends, do we?"

"Not yet," said Jack, "but please, if you know the way, show me!"

Compass set off and Jack ran after her across the frozen ground, and the snow fell thick and fast in their faces.



Part Eight
**THE LOSER'S
LAIR**



THE CRATER

It's not too far, don't worry!" said Compass, her brass case clattering over the stones.

Even so, Jack soon had a stitch again and his sore feet were frozen, but he didn't care at all. All he could think about was CP, who'd stood and let the Loser scoop him up, because he thought Jack didn't love him.

They'd only run a short way when they saw a fiery red glow on the horizon, which grew wider and brighter as they approached.

"It's right ahead," said Compass. "See that fire? The Loser lives in an 'ole in the middle of a crater, and 'e burns a fire all year round. After 'e's sucked out the Alivened part of a Thing, and taken what 'e wants of their bodies, 'e burns up the rest in the flames."

Jack felt a shiver of fear, but didn't slow down. He had to save CP if he could: there was no turning back.

The closer to the Loser's Lair they approached, the bigger and brighter the fiery glow became, and at last the ground began to slope downward. Jack could see a wide hole in the middle of the crater, like a volcano, from which acrid black smoke was issuing. He looked up at the sky above the Loser's Lair. There were no finding holes here at all.

"Stop, Compass," Jack panted, coming to a halt. "I'll go on alone now."

"Nonsense," said Compass excitedly. "I've never been in the Loser's Lair before. What a thrill! What an adventure! You know what my motto is?"

"Was it something about a radish?" asked Jack, who couldn't quite remember.

"That was a moral," said Compass. "I meant, 'socks in the north and umbrellas for best, but when it's all going south, take a friend.' You can't meet the Loser alone!"

"I can, Compass," Jack told her. "I must. You're too important to lose. Things need a hero out here on the Wastes, and you're the only one clever and brave enough to survive."

"What—what a nice fmg to say," said Compass. "Fings never pay me compliments. They're usually running away so fast, they forget."

"Well, I won't forget you, whatever happens," said Jack. "Good-bye, Compass, and thank you for everything."

And he ran down the slope toward the hole in the ground, turning back just once to wave while he knew Compass could still see him.

Jack descended the steep slope, sliding and stumbling on loose rocks and stones. He went as fast as he dared, half-blinded by the fire and smoke coming from the hole in the middle of the crater, and soon his pajamas had dried out completely in the heat, and he began to cough

from the thick black smoke, which didn't smell like a wood bonfire, but reeked of burning plastic, fabric, and foam.

And then, just when Jack was wondering how much farther he'd have to go, his feet now burning on the hot rubble, he slid on loose pebbles, and unable to stop, found himself tumbling into the hole. Down he fell through the smoke into an underground lair, and for a few seconds, he was sure he was going to land in the flames, and that he'd never see Mum or CP again.



THE LOSER'S LAIR

By great good fortune, Jack missed the fire and fell instead onto a hot, springy, soft mound right beside it. It was a few moments before Jack realized he was lying on stuffing and shreds of fabric that the Loser had discarded from the Things he'd eaten. It was smoking and smoldering because it lay so close to the flames. Jack crawled as fast as he could toward a distant stone wall, slipping and sliding over the heaps of fluff and burned material, until he'd reached the side of the underground hole.

It was then that he heard the moans and screams which had been drowned out by the crackling of the enormous fire while he'd lain beside it. Jack screwed up his eyes and looked around.

The Loser's Lair was a gigantic underground cavern, in the middle of which burned the huge fire. Cages hung all over the walls, all of them crammed with the Things the Loser hadn't yet eaten, and it was the cries of some of these imprisoned Things he could hear, although not all of them were screaming. Many were simply huddled at the bottom of their cages, silent and sad, knowing that their end had almost come. They were cheap, ugly Things, most of them: made and lost in their millions, unwanted, unloved, existing only to fill space for a while until they were sucked down below into the Land of the Lost.

And then there was the Loser.

He was so gigantic that—for a moment or two—Jack, who was focused on the cages, hadn't realized he was there, but had taken his enormous body for another pile of junk. The Loser was crouching on the opposite side of the fire to Jack, his horrible head scraping the top of his lair, as it had scraped the wooden sky on the Wastes. His searchlight eyes weren't turned on: he didn't need them here, because the fire burned so brightly, casting flickering shadows onto the walls. The Loser's blank glass eyes reflected the dancing flames, which also illuminated the glittering shell of his body. Evidently the Loser kept only the hardest parts of dead Things: steel, plastic, glass, and stone, which gave him the look of a dreadful robot. At this moment, he was feasting on a handful of old forks, and bits of them flew from his mouth as he crunched them up with his glittering fangs, which appeared to be as hard as diamonds.

The Loser hadn't noticed Jack fall into his lair because Jack had fallen on the opposite side of the fire and been hidden by the thick black smoke. Now Jack looked frantically around at all the cages, trying to spot the Christmas Pig, and hoping against hope that he hadn't already been torn to shreds, his belly beans and stuffing lost in the mounds below.

But Jack couldn't see a single cuddly toy: only small plastic playthings that came free with meals, and old magazines, and chargers for gadgets that no longer worked; objects lost without regret and never missed. Jack's fear that he was too late mounted with every second.

And then, suddenly, Jack spotted him. CP was standing inside one of the very highest cages on the wall, gripping the bars with his little trotters and watching the Loser eat the old forks. With him was Broken Angel, who was slumped in a corner of the cage, her one remaining hand over her shattered face. CP was shabby now, after all his adventures with Jack: no longer plush and pink, but dirty, greenish, and with lop-sided ears.

"I'm coming, CP," whispered Jack, struggling to his feet.

Then the Loser chomped down the last bits of twisted metal and spoke, his voice echoing around the cavern. "*Now* are you afraid, Pig?"

His voice was the most terrible Jack had ever heard. It was like the scream of brakes, high and pained, and it made Jack think that the Loser must be suffering almost as much as the Things waiting for their death.

CP answered, in his dear familiar voice, "No. I told you. I have nothing left to lose, which makes a Thing brave. Eat me whenever you like. It doesn't matter to me anymore."

"You think losing the boy is worse than being torn apart?" said the Loser, in his screeching voice. "Worse than returning to nothingness, to feeling nothing, to *being* nothing?"

"Feeling nothing would be better than what I feel now," said the pig.

"Don't say that!" whispered Jack, even though he knew the Christmas Pig couldn't hear him.

The Loser struggled onto the metal points that served him for feet.

"You will fear me before you die," he promised. He tore the lock off a crowded cage right next to the one holding the Christmas Pig and Bro-

ken Angel, and scooped out fifty twisty plastic straws in gaudy colors, a cheap, flimsy kite, and an ugly glass vase with knobs and twirls all over it. Jack heard their screams of protest as the Loser sank back into a crouch, opened his wide metal mouth, and dropped the Things into it one by one.

In desperation, Jack looked around for a way to reach the Christmas Pig. The walls were rough and craggy, and he thought he might be able to find enough footholds to climb them if he tried, so he reached up, found cracks where he could grip, then began to pull himself upward.

It was slow going. The rock burned beneath his fingers and toes, and behind him he could hear the crackle of the fire and the grinding of the Loser's jaws as he ate his way through plastic and glass.

At last, Jack reached the same level as the topmost cages. It was harder to grip the hot rock up here, and he was worried the poor Things inside the cages might notice him and shout out in surprise, alerting the Loser to the fact that Jack was there. However, most were shielding their eyes, trying not to watch the Loser, who was now picking sharp fragments of glass out of his teeth and attaching them to his shell, which he did by licking them with his horrible black rubber tongue, which seemed to be coated in some kind of glue, then sticking them down on top of the cogs and lids already there.

Jack began to walk across the tops of the cages, jumping from one to the next. The bars were hot beneath his soles, but a new problem struck him as he approached the Christmas Pig, whose little black eyes were still fixed unblinkingly on the Loser. All the cages had heavy padlocks dangling from them, and the one hanging from CP's was the biggest of all.

At last, Jack managed to jump onto the cage holding the Christmas Pig and Broken Angel. "CP," he whispered. "CP, it's me. Look up here."

CP looked up, and for a moment or two, he stood frozen, his little black eyes wide with astonishment, and Broken Angel uncovered her poor half-eaten face and stared up at Jack, too.

"Jack!" gasped the Christmas Pig. "What—what are you—?"

"I've come to rescue you—both of you!" said Jack, crawling across the cage roof to grasp hold of the giant padlock. "You two belong to me, and I'm taking you home!"

"But . . . what about DP?"

"We've said goodbye properly now," said Jack, tugging at the padlock, which remained shut. "He wanted me to do this. I'm going to get you out!"

But he couldn't open the padlock.

"Jack—I don't understand—you wanted DP so much!"

"I thought I needed him," said Jack. "But you need me more."

"You've got to get out of here! There's nothing in the whole of the Land of the Lost that the Loser would like better than to eat a living boy! You'd be the greatest prize he ever caught!"

"I'm not leaving without you," said Jack, still trying to break the padlock, but it wouldn't shift.

"It's too late!" said the Christmas Pig, his tears now trickling down his face. "Jack, there are only a few minutes until Christmas Day—you've got to get yourself under a finding hole! There's no hope for us, but you can still escape!"

But before Jack could reply, the Loser let out the loudest, most terrifying screech Jack had ever heard. His eyes blazed white again as he rose up on his pointed metal feet. Jack, the Christmas Pig, and Broken Angel were caught, transfixed, in their powerful beams.

The Loser had spotted the living boy.



THE LAST HOPE

What is this I spy?" said the Loser, in his awful screeching voice. "A bit of Surplus very different to any I've caught before!"

Jack thrust his hand down between the bars of the cage and seized one of the Christmas Pig's trotters. The broken angel caught hold of CP's other trotter, and the threesome held tightly to one another as the Loser picked his way slowly across the cavern toward them, scattering bits of dead Things with his pointed steel feet. All around the walls, the Things in the cages moaned and gasped, because they'd realized what was happening, and knew that Jack, the Christmas Pig, and Broken Angel would be going into the Loser's mouth next.

"I knew you'd come. Tell me, child," said the Loser, "what makes humans love Things so much?"

The Loser's breath swept over Jack like a hot, foul wind. It smelled as though every rubbish heap in the world was lying in his stomach, of dust, decay, and rotting cloth, of battery acid and burning rubber, of the end of all man-made Things.

"We don't love all Things," said Jack in a shaking voice. "Only very special ones."

"And what," said the Loser, moving closer, his gigantic head bigger than Jack's entire body, his searchlight eyes so bright that Jack could barely look at him, "makes a filthy, cheap pig worth loving?"

"He's the best and bravest pig in the world, that's what," said Jack fiercely.

"You—you love me?" whispered the Christmas Pig.

Jack gripped his trotter more tightly than ever as he said, "Yes, I do!"

"But—but DP!"

"You can love more than one Thing!" said Jack. Turning back to the Loser he said, "Let CP go, and Broken Angel, too! They don't deserve eating. They've never hurt anyone, they've never done anything wrong! Let them come home with me!"

The Loser threw back his head, opened his horrid mouth wide to reveal his huge rubber tongue, lying like a thick black eel between glittering fangs, and laughed. Then he turned his bright, blinding eyes back on Jack and screamed, "Has nobody explained to you what I am, boy? I take, and take, and take again! Christmas Eve is almost over"—the Loser was moving closer, his awful rough diamond teeth glinting in the red light of the fire, his breath a disgusting blast—"and on the last stroke of midnight, you'll be trapped here forever, with no hope of return. Then I